

# The Humpbacked Mules

BY WOLCOTT LE CLEAR BEARD

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SAM was sitting by the roadside on the body of his dead horse, disconsolately wiping his grimy face.

The trail ran straight as a line over the burning sand between the little railway station, a white spot glittering against the blue mountains on the south, and the oasis of Frog Tanks, a smudge of grayish-green trembling in the heat waves on the northern horizon.

The heavy ore wagons in their daily journeys had worn the trail below the level of the adjacent plain, and had covered it with a thick cushion of powdery dust. Half a mile away a playful little whirlwind had picked up some of this dust and had carried it merrily over the desert until, wearying of its plaything, it returned to the road, and, stopping over the man who sat there, allowed its burden to settle slowly upon him. The day was hot. The dust clung to the man's face, and as he vainly tried to rub it off, he cursed it and the country and his luck.

Crawling along the road, near the station, was a black speck, which probably was a freight team, but it was at least four miles away, and could not come up for an hour yet. Still, there was nothing to do but to wait, and Sam cursed again, as, rising, he slipped the bridle off the head of his horse and began to uncinch the saddle. The big wooden stirrup, held down by the weight of the carcass, required a strong pull to free it, but at last it came, and, removing the saddle blanket, Sam hung it on the tree-like trunk of a saguaro cactus, so that it threw a patch of gray shadow on the brilliant sand. Then he sat down in the shade to wait for the expected wagon. But it was not a wagon—he could see that now—but a horseman with a pack animal, coming along at the prairie jog which looks so slow and covers so much ground.

The Arabian proverb which says that in the desert no man meets a friend is true in a measure of Arizona. For a while Sam watched the approaching traveler warily; then with a grunt of satisfaction he sprang to his feet, as the horseman drew near enough to be seen distinctly, and stepped out into the middle of the trail, waving his hat.

The other, raising his right arm in answer, put his mount into a canter and rode up to where Sam was standing.

"Say, Pete," cried Sam, when the nodes of greeting had passed, "I'm up against a standstill. Broke his leg in a badger hole and had to shoot him. Couldn't you lift me on to Frog Tanks?"

Pete dismounted and began casting loose the ropes which bound the pack to the animal. "Saddle up," he said, as the bundles rolled on the ground. "We'll divide the plunder and pack it between us. It isn't much."

"Bound for the wedding, ain't you, Pete?" asked Sam, tugging at his girth.

Pete nodded. "Carlo sent over and asked me," he replied as he mounted.

"That's good," said Sam. "You don't want to miss it. It's the first wedding Frog Tanks ever had, and Carlo's humpin' himself to do it up in shape. And then it ain't many weddings that runs a dark horse in the pair."

"Dark horse? What do you mean? Haven't they decided on the bride yet?" inquired Pete, puzzled.

Sam swung into his saddle. "Oh, yes," he said; "bride's all right enough. She Highjolly's widow."

"Widow?" interrupted Pete quickly.

"Yep. He's dead. Never come back to deny it, anyhow. You know she was one of those high-toned greasers who owns the big Spanish grant over Rio Juana way—Cartina, their name is."

She was old Cartina's daughter. Always dead queer, they say, an' when Highjolly comes along, she ketches him up an' marries him. Old Cartina was dead sore an' wouldn't have nothin' more to do with her. Then there was a cowboy on the ranch—a greaser, too, I reckon—and he was sorer than any because the girl had shook him, an' so he starts in to shoot holes in Highjolly, but Highjolly and the girl they skips, an' bimbeys they turns up in Frog Tanks. Highjolly ain't his real name. Don't know what that is. He's an A-rab."

"Greek," said Pete.

"Greek, then," replied Sam. "It's all the same. But how'd you know?"

Pete looked uneasy and shifted in his saddle. "Knew Highjolly and the cow puncher long ago, before I came in these parts," he said. "The puncher wasn't a greaser. White man. Fool, too. Go on."

"Highjolly's head has always been busted about them humpbacked mules, I reckon," Sam continued. "He fetched 'em into the country. Likely you know."

"Fetched what into the country?" asked his companion. "What are you talking about?"

"Humpbacked mules. Camels. They call 'em that mos' gen'ly here. Govment had 'em to pack mails an' things, but the mule pack route their feet up, an' the Southern Pacific came through, so they wasn't much good, an' they turned 'em loose. Highjolly, he brung 'em here, an' he was boss camel puncher while they lasted. That's what made me say he was an A-rab. A-rabs goes with camels. They sent some to Australia or s'mother seaport, but there's a big gang of 'em left, jus' loafin' round the desert, here, havin' colts. Highjolly was always tryin' ter roun' 'em up. Big money in 'em, he says, an' he'd win a grub stake somehow and then pack up them three burros or his an' light out. One morn' at the time, he said that once in six months or so when they had to fill up on water, the camels used ter hit Frog Tanks. That was settled, an' now they have ter go by, far er near, to get to the Gila. So he brung his wife there, an' then he wanted ter go cameling, but she kiked. He couldn't raise enough fer a grub stake, an' she wouldn't give up no dust, so they pulls hair about it considerable. Heard 'em once—it was great. Well, one day he digs up some silver she's cashed and skips, swearin' he's stay away till he come back ridin' a camel. He never come back. One of his burros did, though, with an empty canteen on his back. An' now the widder's hooked another chump. That's all."

"Who is he?" inquired Pete.

"I forgot. That's the queer part. Nobody knows but her, an' she keeps it dead shady. Says he's—how'd that now? Oh, yes; a noble an' high-minded man; only some ducks got it in fer him on a crooked lay an' is givin' him the go by, low down. That's the sense of it. Say, Pete, how'd it come you didn't know all this? Thought there wasn't a man for a hundred miles round that wasn't on."

Pete was gazing with great apparent interest at a huzzard wheeling about in the sky, and for some time he made no reply. He was a small man, with a handsome, aquiline face, from which the tan of an outdoor life was slowly fading. His intense hatred of the Spanish-Indian Mexicans, and his propensity to shoot them whenever they gave him an excuse, had earned him the nickname of "Greaser Pete," while his marvelous skill with his pistols had made him famous even in that country.

The huzzard had dwindled to a black speck and then disappeared. Sam had nearly forgotten his question.

"I suppose it is queer I hadn't heard," said Pete at last.

There was another pause, again broken by Pete. "You're sure you've got it straight about Highjolly's being dead, aren't you?" he asked.

"Dead!" cried Sam. "Say, you don't think he'd send the burro back with the canteen

an' go patten' gravel across the desert himself, do you?"

"No," answered Pete reflectively. "No, I don't suppose he would. But I'm sorry he's gone. I had some business with him. About some—ah—horses."

"Wasn't him, was it, that—?" Sam began, but Pete interrupted him.

"Who's that coming from over beyond the rise—see the dust?"

A short distance in front of the two men another trail, hidden almost to the point of junction by a ridge of basalt rock, joined the one on which they were traveling. Over the top of this ridge floated a cloud of dust, which, together with a faint rattle of loose spokes and worn-out running-gear, told of a wagon slowly plodding along the concealed road. A breath of air wafted the impalpable powder in the same direction as that in which the team was going, so that the wagon was hidden by it. The equipment swung into the main road ahead of the horsemen, a pillar of cloud, drawn by two diminutive bronchos. Sorry-looking animals they were, their grass-bloated barrels giving their bodies an appearance of fatness much belied by their starved necks and legs. As they changed their course the dust drifted slowly aside, revealing in all its poverty the boxless skeleton of a wagon. Its reach was broken, and it sagged in the middle, where it had been clumsily mended with baling wire. The spokes remaining in the wheels were secured, also with wire, to the parting felloes. Across the two beds a board had been laid. A large bundle, wrapped in a dirty table cloth of red-and-white check, was secured to the after end of this board, while, balancing it, on

ties of meat sauce) off eatin' house tables an' such. An' that he 'bout bein' married. Gives me a swift pain, that does."

"No lie, I think," answered Pete.

"No lie!" cried Sam. "Oh, say! The widder's locoed, maybe—think she is, myself—but Hog Johnson!"

"She married Highjolly," said Pete.

"I know; but Johnson's such a triflin' sort of a thief. See that bundle on the back of his truck? Well, the tablecloth around that he got from some eatin' house or other—Gila Bend, likely. But I don't see how he worked it. He couldn't 'a' took it off the table. Swiped it when they hung it up to dry, maybe; but then they'd 'a' been washin' it, an' that don't seem prob'le neither."

Lost in the abstract speculation thus opened, Sam jogged on in silence until, at last, the settlement was reached.

Frog Tanks was receiving its guests.

The corral on the edge of the desert was packed with horses. Many more were picketed in the open, greedily cropping the rich grass of the oasis, or munching their barley out of great six-horse wagons, to the wheels of which they were tied, while their dusty harness lay strewn on the ground about them.

In the middle of the oasis, on the highest point of the saloon-lined trail which cut it in halves, stood the Cowboy's Rest dance-hall, faced on the other side by the Monte Carlo. In front of these resorts the more select portion of the guests were assembled, crowding the earth-floored verandas even to the gravelly trail. It was a variegated crowd. There were ranchers from along the Rio Gila, which lay many miles to the north;

one of the faro tables, leaned indolently against the wall of the cottonwood logs serving as pillars of the veranda.

As Pete dismounted in front of the saloon Carlo slowly raised his big frame and stepped forward to receive him. Both were men of few words, and they greeted each other with the labored and cautious cordiality of rival though friendly powers.

The two great men entered the saloon and the crowd followed them. Perrin stepped up to Sam, who was holding the horses.

"Howdy, Sam," he said. "How're they comin'?"

"Eh? Come to help us marry off the widder? No? Maybe you're the fool to the outfit. How's that? Manuel, you Greaser, come here."

The swarthy Mexican slouched up, and taking the horses led them away as Sam returned Perrin's greeting and that of the gambler.

"No," he said, "I ain't the he-fool. S'pose the widder ain't give it out yet who her noble an' high-minded chrono is?"

"No, she's kept it dark up to date," replied the gambler. "He'll have to show up soon, though, or it'll be a single-barreled wedding; it comes off at eight, and it's nearly sundown now. I'm goin' to be a feed afterwards and a dance. Sports tomorrow."

"Ah? No? Ropin'. Racin'. That's right," chirped Perrin.

"Look here," said Sam. "Pete an' me was comin' up here just now, an' we ketched up with Hog Johnson. He's comin' here." The gambler smiled incredulously, and Sam saw the smile.

"He was comin' here as fast as he could lick them cask-bellied skeletons or his into pullin' him," Sam repeated impressively. "More'n that,

he's the one what's a-gonter marry the widder."

If Sam had counted upon astonishing his hearers, he was disappointed. The statement was too absurd; they were merely incredulous.

"Why, Sam, you mustn't take anything Johnson says for fair," said the gambler. "He'd lie just for the fun of it."

"Thought he'd found a mark, no? Reckon he had, too. Ain't that right?" chuckled Perrin.

"No, it ain't right," answered Sam with some heat. "I thought it was a bluff, first off, an' I wanted to beat him up fer chuckin' it. But he's comin' here, an' he wouldn't never dare do that without Carlo's say-so. Jus' tell Carlo, an' see what he says. But, say, Pete must 'a' put him on."

As Sam spoke Carlo strode from the saloon-door, his big body completely screening Pete, who was behind him. The King's dark face seemed to have grown darker from the anger behind it. The crowd opened to let him through, and when he struck off down the trail no one followed him.

"Did you tell him?" asked Sam, edging close to Pete. Pete nodded.

From the Monte Carlo came the hum of voices, the clanking of belted spurs, and the rattle of chips on the table. Enthroned in his hide-seated chair in front of the saloon, King Carlo, the undisputed ruler of Frog Tanks, held his court. Behind him stood the nervous, tierrier-like figure of Billy Perrin, the constable, one of Carlo's two principal henchmen. The other, a dealer from

foremn and bosses from the mines, still farther away; cowboys, with their faces tanned to much the same color as their leather chapparejos, stippling the sod with their high boot-tops; Mexican vaqueros of the better sort, their gaudy costumes and silver-trimmed hats making spots of bright color in the throng.

Away from this aristocratic centre the costumes became dirtier and less complete, until at the little adobe drinking-booths, which crowded off the edge of the oasis, stood on the desert itself, the men who quarreled over their mesal were sandal-shod Greasers of the lowest type, removed but little by blood and instinct from the lithe Apaches who stalked silently among the company.

Without waiting for a reply, Sam spurred on, but his companion stopped him.

"Hold on, Sam Johnson, you say you're going our way. Take these two packs on to Frog Tanks. I know everything that's in them, you know."

He glanced significantly at the speck, as he spoke, at the bundle on the wagon. "Pay you for hauling them when we get there." He began unfastening the pack that was fastened to his saddle, and motioned Sam to do likewise.

"I don't want no pay," whined Johnson. "What d'you think I'd take for that?"

"Anything in sight that you could," said Pete contemptuously. "And you say you're going to marry Inez Cartina. Good Lord! Ready, Sam? Come on."

"Say, Pete," said Sam, after they were once more on their way, "you want to look into the packs when you get 'em again. Hog Johnson's a thief—a pikin' thief; he hasn't got the sand fer nothin' else. Swipes juglets or liniment (bot-

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RAISING HIS RIGHT ARM IN ANSWER, HE RODE UP TO WHERE SAM WAS STANDING

## Strange Race of People Losing the Use of Their Legs

IN British Guiana, about 200 miles south of the capital, Georgetown, there are to be found by the venturesome traveler a strange race of aborigines who are losing the use of their legs. Canoe people these river folks are termed by the Indians and Creoles because of the strange life they lead; they seldom, if ever, step upon land except to treat with some high dignitary of another tribe who will not approach them in their canoes.

Descended from the Macusi, the aboriginal Indians of the Guianas, and having intermarried with the savage blacks of the country, these canoe people show a strange blending of the lazy characteristics of the blacks and the wisdom and craftiness of the Indian.

They are the most skilled navigators in the world and they know more stream lore than could be learned in centuries by civilized man.

The favorite haunts of these canoe people are up the tributaries of the Demerara, one of the most famous rivers of British Guiana; the traveler usually follows its course from Georgetown to Akyma, a distance of a little less than one hundred miles.

The Demerara runs almost directly north and south and is navigable for about 150 miles, the remaining 50 miles are broken by whirlpools and cataracts and are but seldom explored by white men. Here the canoe people hold sway, following their primitive customs, which have seen little change in the passing of the centuries.

The river beyond Akyma is a dirty yellow and is much inhabited by sharks, alligators and several varieties of ugly-looking fish, upon which the Canoe people subsist and grow sturdy and

strong. To the European palate these fish are anything but tempting.

In the region of the Canoes the Demerara is dotted with innumerable small islands, upon which, at one time, these people built their huts, held their councils, planned their wars, performed their religious rites and in short turned into villages in which dwelt the several tribes of their people.

The islands, however, could be made to yield nothing but rank growths; there was no game to be found on them; indeed, they were nothing but so much useless land and the Macusi were obliged to take to the river for their living. They fished and they ate what they caught; they speared the alligators and towed them to Georgetown, where they secured a fair price for the best specimens or else traded them in for tobacco or fire water.

Little by little these people failed to return to their primitive huts upon the islands. They took up their abode in the canoes on the bosom of the river, which supplied them with food and other means of obtaining the few luxuries which their simple nature craved.

The Canoe people are a peace loving race, not even warring among themselves, and whenever the white man has approached them they have treated him fairly, carried him safely over parts of the river so dangerous that none but a born and raised on the water could navigate them, and then they have bade him "a happy marriage" and glided back to the waters among their deserted islands. They refuse to learn the white man's ways or to adopt the civilized customs of even the Indians and negroes living not 100 miles apart from them and with whom they frequently come in contact when they trade.

They are a race apart and the only civilized custom they seem to have adopted is monogamy. Somewhere they picked up the phrase "A happy marriage" and they use it as a form of greeting and of goodspeed, not among themselves, but to the Indians and Creoles with whom they trade.

Their wedding ceremony is a strange one. When the bride is chosen the suitor, with as many friends as he can gather, approaches the girl in her canoe and pays his respects, presenting her with a string of shark's teeth. If the ducky swim finds favor in her eyes she accepts the chain and pulls off in her canoe to her father in his craft, while the lover and his train glide away in the opposite direction.

Perhaps the girl has been courted by other lovers whom she did not favor; if so, when she has accepted the string of shark's teeth she is taken by her father to "Centre Island" and left there with food enough to appease her hunger while her sire goes about collecting the rejected suitors.

These paddle their canoes to an island eight miles south of Centre Island, while the accepted suitor and his friends glide off to another island eight miles north of Centre.

Exactly at sunrise the two factions pull out for Centre Island, upon which the girl, all eagerness and excitement, stands waiting their approach.

Each rejected suitor is allowed to be accompanied by two friends. Should the men from the south island reach Centre first they take their stand beside the girl, spears in hand, and endeavor to keep the accepted suitor and his aides from landing.

The girl is left in perfect freedom and she runs from one part of the island to another. It is often her strategem which wins her her